

# « WWI is the founding story of our time »

For Viviane Fayaud, UPJV historian, the First World War was the price Australians and New Zealanders paid for recognition of their independence.

## FACTS

► As in years past, 25 April will see thousands of Australians participate in the dawn service to commemorate their countrymen who died in Europe during the First World War.

► Ceremonies take place in Villers-Bretonneux (Somme) and in Gallipoli (Turkey) for Anzac Day (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps).

► In Picardy ANZAC Day is synonymous with Villers-Bretonneux. But what exactly does this event signify ?

ANZAC is an acronym for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. It's much less a celebration of a victory than it is a commemoration of the baptism of fire and first heavy losses Australian and New Zealand troops experienced, beginning with their defeat in Gallipoli (in the Dardanelles, Turkey) in 1915, and continuing in Picardy in 1916, with the Battle of the Somme. All British overseas forces were placed under British command. It needn't have been so. Both Australia and New Zealand were already dominions, independent states. They chose to participate, even if it is true that the British Ministry of Defence had mobilized its former empire to provide their quota.

► Yet as the losses started to mount, Australian popular opinion twice rejected calls for conscription. Was the momentum really so significant?

Australians volunteered willingly. They didn't want to sit back and be forced to do so. Though at the beginning the war was clearly perceived as a European conflict, public opinion was largely in favour of participation. Just not through conscription.

► More than 540,000 soldiers from both countries signed up. To what extent did they pay their dues during the war?

As a proportion of their population, losses were estimated to be 35%! Which is all the more significant considering, at the time, Oceania was relatively deserted. Yet in spite of the magnitude of this upheaval, they still managed to recover.



One of the 750 photos of Australian soldiers taken in Vignacourt, village in the western Somme where they were stationed.

► To what extent did the First World War help forge the nations of Australia and New Zealand?

Though they were independent states at the time, in Europe both were still perceived as colonies. It's particularly evident in the way they were portrayed in the Picardy press from 1915 to 1918. The then Australian prime minister quickly understood how his nation could turn the war to his country's advantage, finally giving it the international stature it sought; indeed it found its place at the negotiating table in Versailles. It was in this spirit that the Australian prime minister arrived in Versailles in the name of the 60,000 dead Australian soldiers. That too is what it is to become a nation.

► Other than the Australians and New Zealanders, has history forgotten the participation of other Oceanic peoples?

Their numbers were far smaller, but yes, the French Oceanic Establishment sent 1,300 New Caledonians, and 900 Tahitians as part of the Pacific Riflemen. As early as 22 September 1914, German ships bombed Papeete (Tahiti), suddenly bringing the war to the forefront for locals and feeding their desire to fight. Remem-

## THE HUMAN COST OF WORLD WAR I

8 million killed	6 837 killed/day	1 170 days
6,5 millions wounded	6 millions orphaned	3 millions widowed

■ The battle of the Somme, in July 1916, was the bloodiest

1 million killed	7 141 killed/day	140 days
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ber that Micronesia, Samoa and New Guinea were German colonies at the time, hence the presence of a militarized fleet in the region. Fijians and Maoris also participated. Even in the Pacific Ocean, the smallest island and archipelago were touched by the

war. It was, after all, a world at war.

► What drove these Oceanians to travel the 18,000km separating them from distant European shores?

Undertaking a sea voyage lasting several weeks didn't faze



« The Australian prime minister in Versailles in the name of the 60,000 dead Australian soldiers. That too is what it is to become a nation »

these ocean-going peoples. Their desire to discover new horizons, their group spirit, the discourses of teachers and priests all had their role to play. This didn't change their unpreparedness, firstly for the cold, but even simply the concept of wearing boots. Some died during the voyage, others shortly after their arrival, from pneumonia or the flu. Those that remained were at first relegated to tasks behind the front lines, such as preparing trenches. This first step into Europe was a humiliation for the warriors of the Marquises, the Maoris and Fijians, as they awaited their turn to fight on the front line.

► The Villers-Bretonneux ANZAC Day ceremony is broadcast live on Australian television. It really feels like the commemoration of the Battle of the Somme is much more important to Australians and New Zealanders than it is for Picards. How can that be so?

For the French collective memory, the First World War has its own key event: the Battle of Verdun. The people of Oceania arrived in 1916, for the Battle of the Somme, participating alongside the troops of a great many nations. For Australia and New Zealand, in 1916, their status as 19th century colonial outposts was now past, as they claimed their new places on the world stage in the 20th century and beyond. For both nations the war has since become part of their collective nation-building mythology. It's a tale that no longer requires any involvement of living witnesses.